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Seminar 5

## Avoiding a Second Bay of Pigs: Lessons Relevant to the Liberation of Iraq

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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**Abstract of**

**AVOIDING A SECOND BAY OF PIGS:  
LESSONS RELEVANT TO THE LIBERATION OF IRAQ**

The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 states that it is the sense of Congress that it should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq. Such an effort will require close coordination between the U.S. military and intelligence organizations. The U.S. government undertook a similar effort in the early 1960's against the Castro regime in Cuba. There are a number of valuable lessons in a study of that unsuccessful effort, popularly known as the Bay of Pigs.

This paper, utilizing open source material, looks at the mistakes made in both the earlier Bay of Pigs and more recent Iraq liberation efforts. The paper emphasizes the operational perspective and provides suggestions concerning how the U.S. military and intelligence communities, working together, might avoid committing another national policy failure.

## **Avoiding a Second Bay of Pigs: Lessons Relevant to the Liberation of Iraq**

### *Iraq Liberation Act of 1998*

*An Act to establish a program to support a transition to democracy in Iraq.*

*It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Thesis**

The "Iraq Liberation Act of 1998" clearly states that it is the sense of the Congress that it be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq. Such an effort, if implemented by the president, will require close coordination between the U.S. military and intelligence organizations if it is to succeed. In the early 1960's, the United States government undertook a similar effort against the Castro regime in Cuba.

A number of lessons can be drawn from a study of that singularly unsuccessful effort, popularly known as the Bay of Pigs, which should prove instructive in planning an approach to the current Iraq problem. This paper, utilizing open source material, will look at the mistakes made in both the earlier Bay of Pigs and more recent Iraq liberation efforts to draw conclusions on where we should go from here from the operational perspective. This paper does not intend to present a strategic blueprint for the liberation of Iraq but will place sole emphasis on the operational perspective. It will examine how the U.S. military and intelligence communities, working together, might avoid repeating operational mistakes which resulted in a national policy failure during the ill fated Bay of Pigs operation in 1961.

## Introduction

*"How could I have been so stupid to let them go ahead?"<sup>2</sup>*

Hindsight is always 20/20 vision. Unfortunately for President Kennedy and the executors and operatives of Operation Zapata, the official CIA designation for the Bay of Pigs operation, there was no "hindsight" from which to view U.S. government efforts to overthrow Cuban leader Fidel Castro in 1961. The opening quote to this section was a question presented by President Kennedy to his special counsel, Theodore C. Sorenson, shortly after the failure of the Bay of Pigs operation. Unlike U.S. government officials in the Kennedy Administration, the planners and executors of the "Iraq Liberation Act" will have the benefit of hindsight, thanks to the many lessons from the ashes of Operation Zapata. If we identify and study these lessons, we might be able to avoid in the near future recording a similar quote from yet another president.

The following "key lessons" gleaned from the failure of Operation Zapata should be studied closely by any U.S. military commander or government executor during preparation of planning in pursuit of the objectives of the "Iraq Liberation Act.

- The military command entities (CENTCOM) should have primary responsibility for the conduct of paramilitary efforts involving exiled opposition groups with the CIA in a supporting role.<sup>3</sup>
- Great care is important in the selection of opposition elements to which the U.S. government will provide material and financial support. It must be clear that these elements maintain strong levels of popular support within a substantial percentage of the Iraqi populace.

- No decision regarding the use of force without first having made the decision to use whatever force is necessary to achieve success.<sup>4</sup>
- We must closely assess the degree of covertness for any operation while keeping in mind the limits of the realistic capabilities of the military means at hand. In simpler terms, the U.S. government hand is hard to hide.<sup>5</sup>

### **Background to the Bay of Pigs**

Operation Zapata was an offspring of the Cold War, conceived during the final year of the Eisenhower Administration. The intended result (endstate) was to have been the removal of Cuban leader Fidel Castro from power and the establishment of a new government in Cuba. This government was to be more amenable to U.S. interests as delineated during the Cold War era. In March 1960, the CIA developed a plan referred to as, "A Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime." This program consisted of four principal steps: (1) creation of a "responsible and unified" Cuban government in exile; (2) "a powerful propaganda offensive"; (3) "a covert intelligence and action organization" in Cuba, to be "responsive" to the exile opposition; and (4) "a paramilitary force outside of Cuba for future guerrilla action."<sup>6</sup>

The CIA worked on its plan during the concluding nine months of 1960, without consultation with the military establishment. After all, the CIA had been very successful in bringing about regime change in Guatemala in 1954 and Eisenhower trusted that they could do it again. The program did not come to fruition before the change of administrations in January 1961. In the interim, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) commissioned an internal study on the subject, which concluded that a guerrilla force would only be successful if it had U.S. military

support. The Kennedy Administration was non-committal on the project but authorized the CIA to continue training and ordered the military to continue preparing evaluations but not become involved. In March 1961, the CIA briefed President Kennedy on its plan, which was actively being organized at clandestine bases in Central America, utilizing available Cuban exile groups which had been recruited in southern Florida. Kennedy, not yet comfortable in his new position as commander-in-chief, ordered that the plan be made "less spectacular," expressing a desire for a "quiet" landing, "preferably at night, with no basis for American military intervention."<sup>7</sup> As a result of the inexperienced president's hesitations, the less conducive Bay of Pigs location was selected for the invasion and the dedicated level of U.S. military support, as proposed by the CIA and supported by the military, was de-emphasized. This event represented the seeds for disaster and failure.

In mid-April 1961 the operation commenced, highlighted by a series of almost keystone cop like errors on behalf of the CIA planners and executors. Last minute policy changes dictated by a nervous and unconvinced president accentuated the problem. The operation was a total failure resulting in the capture and imprisonment of over one thousand Cuban guerrilla fighters and the deaths of several others, including a handful of CIA officers. Because of this failure, Castro remained in power and ever closer to the Soviet Union. This incident created a serious rift between the president and his military and intelligence services. U.S. international prestige was at a low point with serious ramifications to come as manifested a few years later by the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam War.

## Background to the Iraq Liberation Act

*"The doctrine here has to be rollback, not containment."*<sup>8</sup>

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) spoke these words in 1998, during deliberations in Congress over the passage of the "Iraq Liberation Act." This statement and the subsequent passage of legislation supporting the newly proposed policy are stark reversals of overt post Gulf War U.S. government policy towards Iraq. At the conclusion of the Gulf War (March 1991) U.S. military and coalition forces were in a position to continue their march all the way to Baghdad. Disparate coalition views on the subject of removing Saddam from power influenced President Bush. He ordered a conclusion to the war and implemented a policy of "containment. In a joint memoir about the Bush presidency, Bush, and his national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft explained that they would have welcomed the removal of Saddam by Iraqi opposition elements. President Bush never promised to provide aid to an uprising. This was due to his concerns about a possible resulting breakup of Iraq."<sup>9</sup>

During the pursuant years, official U.S. government policy was one of covert financial support to various Iraqi opposition groups organized under the umbrella of the Iraqi National Congress (INC). The CIA who in essence was undertaking what the military was unable to accomplish due to geopolitical constraints managed this covert action program. The INC established its base of operations in the rugged mountainous region of northern Iraq as uneasy guests of the feuding Iraqi Kurds. The INC, from its inception in 1992 until its inglorious and bloody expulsion by the Iraqi army in 1996, conducted an ineffectual campaign. Splinter groups of Iraqi oppositionists, primarily composed of former Iraqi army officers and deserters, also received support from the CIA. They also failed in making any headway in either containing or replacing Saddam.<sup>10</sup>



Congress, inspired by a combination of partisan politics and legitimate frustration with a seemingly never-ending war with Saddam, began debate in the summer of 1998 on a resolution designed to redirect the apparently failed policy of containment toward a more aggressive policy of removal. The resulting congressional action entitled "Iraq Liberation Act of 1998" passed as a joint bill of the Senate and House of Representatives in October. Section 4 of this bill, entitled "Assistance to support a transition to democracy in Iraq," outlines the principal areas of assistance which "the president may provide to the Iraqi democratic opposition organizations." Sub-paragraph 2 outlined the parameters of military assistance:

*(1st) The President is authorized to direct the draw down of defense articles from the stocks of the Department of Defense, Defense Services of the Department of Defense, and military education and training for such organizations.*

*(2nd) The Aggregate value of assistance provided under this paragraph may not exceed \$97,000,000.<sup>11</sup>*

In February 1999, President Clinton issued Presidential Determination No. 99-13. This directive designates seven Iraqi opposition groups to whom military support would be authorized: the Iraqi National Accord, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), the Movement for Constitutional Monarchy, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).<sup>12</sup>

### **Relevance of lessons learned from the Bay of Pigs**

History often repeats itself. As we approach the end of this century, the United States finds itself contemplating the removal of a leader from power in a sovereign and independent

state. Congress, as evidenced by the passage of the "Iraq Liberation Act," has authorized the president to direct the Department of Defense to assist designated Iraqi opposition elements in their efforts to remove Saddam from power in Iraq. This objective will be similar to that of the Bay of Pigs operation in 1961, an operation which was described by historian Theodore Draper as, "one of those rare events in history - a perfect failure."<sup>13</sup> In order for the United States to avoid another "perfect failure," a close examination of the "lessons learned" from the Bay of Pigs and an understanding of their relevance to today's objective of assisting the Iraqi opposition will be beneficial. Four primary "lessons learned" were identified in the introduction to this paper. The application of these "lessons" to our contemplated support for designated Iraqi opposition groups will be the more difficult chore.

Lesson One stated that the military command entities, with the CIA in a supporting role, should have the primary responsibility for the conduct of paramilitary efforts involving exiled opposition groups. In the Bay of Pigs operation, we approached this issue in reverse order with disastrous results. In 1960, the CIA established training bases in Central America and attempted to train covertly an army of Cuban exiles with which to invade Cuba. The military provided only limited technical advice on training facilities.<sup>14</sup> The CIA's failure to involve closely the military in its efforts to execute a plan that ultimately called for strong military support (air cover) was a major mistake. It compounded this mistake by not keeping the national command authority properly advised on the pro's and con's of the plan and the dangers apparent if adequate military support was not provided at the crucial moment of execution. As we begin to contemplate a new round of military training efforts, this time with the recently designated Iraqi opposition groups, we should heed this lesson and approach this effort in a joint manner with military advisors in the lead.

Lesson Two emphasizes the importance of selection of opposition elements to which we provide support. In the Bay of Pigs operation, we eagerly recruited any Cuban exiles residing in the United States who expressed an interest in opposing the Castro regime. The military and CIA extended little effort toward researching how the Cuban people might receive this invading army. Academics recruited by the White House eventually did research the issue and found that "the last thing Cubans wanted was the return of politicians who went into exile with ...forces of corruption."<sup>15</sup> On invasion day, the local populace met the Cuban exile army with heavily armed resistance. Invasion planners had failed to recognize that the Cuban populace was prepared to defend their homeland and would not rally to the support of just any opposition element, no matter what their personal opinions of the regime leader might be.

In our efforts to oppose Saddam, we have continued to repeat this mistake. Many members of the Iraqi opposition leadership are individuals with little or no current standing inside Iraq. Ahmad Chalabi, the titular head of the INC and an indicted bank embezzler in Jordan, does not have a clear following inside Iraq.<sup>16</sup> We need to ensure that whoever leads an U.S. sponsored opposition organization is acceptable to the Iraqi people.

Lesson Three stated that no decision to use force be implemented without a decision in advance to use whatever force is necessary to achieve success. In the Bay of Pigs operation, we violated this lesson with disastrous results. On the day of the invasion senior advisors did not keep President Kennedy fully informed as to the consequences of the denial of full air support for the invasion. His refusal to permit the participation of U.S. warplanes, as originally expected by the invading oppositionists and their U.S. trainers, was catastrophic.<sup>17</sup> The "Iraq Liberation Act," by authorizing military assistance for designated opposition groups, documents a decision to use force in overthrowing the Saddam regime. It is now imperative that this effort have the full

backing of the national command authority and that the military be authorized to provide whatever support might be necessary once a plan is executed. A repeat of the 1961 failure of resolve by a president to authorize military support for a U.S. sponsored opposition effort to overthrow a regime, in this case Saddam, would be even more damaging to national morale and image than it was in the case of Cuba.

Lesson Four states that it is not always possible to hide the U.S. government hand in an operation in support of an opposition organization. The realities of this statement were all too clear to President Kennedy who often responded in anger to repeated leaks in U.S. newspapers of the U.S. led plans to overthrow Castro. In one case, he stated, "Castro doesn't need agents over here. All he has to do is read our papers. It's all laid out for him."<sup>18</sup> The enactment of the "Iraq Liberation Act," by both the Senate and House of Representatives, is part of a public record open for anyone to read. The U.S. and foreign press have closely covered this story and the recent testimony of CENTCOM CINC General Zinni, quoting his negative views of the act, have been widely repeated.<sup>19</sup> If there ever was a chance for this matter to have remained covert, it is impossible now. Our experience with Iraqi opposition groups has proven that they are not capable of conducting military operations on their own and will require extensive assistance from the U.S. if they are to have any chance of success. Keeping the story of U.S. support for their military efforts a secret is impossible but this fact should not keep the U.S. from providing such support. We must remember that any support given must be under close supervision as the U.S. is accountable for how its employment.

### **Proposed course of action**

In the January/February 1999 edition of *Foreign Affairs* three respected political analysts, Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Gideon Rose, published an insightful article regarding U.S. led efforts to overthrow the Saddam regime in Iraq. The article, entitled "The Rollback Fantasy," condemned earlier efforts by the United States to oppose Saddam. It divided U.S. led efforts into three categories: The airpower approach (U.S. military bombing campaigns), the enclave approach (INC activities in Northern Iraq), and the Afghan approach. The authors condemned the enclave approach as a repeat of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In their conclusion, the authors call for a continuation of the "limited containment" approach which "will not necessarily get the United States what it wants. But might help it get what it needs."<sup>20</sup>

In this paper, I propose a more aggressive posture incorporating aspects of the so-called "Afghan approach." We must apply the lessons of the Bay of Pigs to any approach toward the Iraq problem. The Afghan approach calls for the United States to assist the opposition in mounting an insurgency on the model of the Afghan mujahideen. Other examples of successful opposition groups assisted on these lines are the Nicaraguan Contras and the Vietcong. As outlined in the *Foreign Affairs* article, "the Afghan approach calls for the United States to help the opposition establish a safe haven next to the theater of operations and then recruit, train, and equip a force that can conduct a guerrilla insurgency against Saddam's regime. Following Mao's classic three-step approach - start on the defensive, force a stalemate, then go on the offensive - the opposition would start small and avoid conventional battles with the Iraqi army until the rebels had a good chance of winning. After many years the insurgents would topple Saddam's regime and gain control of the country. This plan would require only a modest commitment of outside resources and no risk of substantial American casualties."<sup>21</sup>

The principal question to answer now is which opposition group is best worthy of our support. This is not an easy question to answer. The appropriate group, at least in the mind of this author, is one to whom the U.S. has traditionally been reluctant to support, primarily out of ignorance of its cultural background and true nationalistic bearing. The group referred to here is the Iraqi Shi'a, many of whom are represented by SCIRI.

*Background:*

The simple mention of Shi'a Muslims in a discussion regarding forces in the Middle East evokes thoughts of anti-American, Iranian sponsored radicalism in the minds of most U.S. policy makers and senior military officials. When speaking of those Shi'a residing in Iraq, little thought is given to their true origin. While it is accurate to state that the largest and most influential Shi'a community in the Middle East is located in Iran it is important to recognize that significant pockets of non-Iranian Shi'a reside throughout the region. A large segment of this community claim southern Iraq as home. The Shi'a of southern Iraq are Arab, not Persian, and are in fact relatively recent converts to the Shi'a branch of Islam. The Shi'a branch of Islam has been a dominating force in southern Iraq since the early years of this religious movement due to the presence there of two of the sect's holiest cities, Najaf and Karbala. It was not, however, until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century that the majority of the Arab tribes in the region were converted to the Shi'a sect. The basis of this conversion was the tribe's economic dependence upon the water and resources of the two principal cities of the religious movement. Shi'a ritual slowly became part of the newly settled tribe's culture but not the predominant political force.<sup>22</sup>

The Shi'a of Iraq never make demands for a separate state and have historically supported the national interests of the Arab state centered in Baghdad. They have periodically sought a more proportional share of national power but remain today a largely disenfranchised segment of

the Iraqi political structure. This position is in stark contrast to that of the Kurds in northern Iraq where to date, the majority of U.S. sponsored opposition activity has occurred. The Kurds are not Arabs and seek autonomy from Baghdad, not a proportional share of national power.

In March 1991, thousands of Shi'a in southern Iraq rose up in armed opposition to the central authority of Baghdad, as represented by oppressive Iraqi military forces stationed in their cities. The uprising was, in part, due to their heeding of calls from the U.S. president for the Iraqi people to overthrow the Saddam regime. The Iraqi military easily suppressed the revolt, which was spontaneous and disorganized. This uprising, however ineffectual, gives evidence to the fact that the Shi'a of southern Iraq are willing to pay the price for bringing about change but only lack the organizational and material support.

A successful Iraqi Shi'a movement will have a secondary benefit for U.S. policy objectives in the region as it would present a challenge to Iran's influence. A weakened Iraq, such as we have today, only contributes toward the increase in power and influence of Iran in the region to the detriment of the U.S. A renewed Iraq, with Shi'a participation in government will present a challenge and counter-balance to Iran's influence and efforts to spread radical revolution in the region.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Proposals:*

Efforts, under the direction and control of CENTCOM, to organize the various Shi'a opposition elements active in southern Iraq should commence. Legitimate and popularly supported Shi'a opposition leaders to whom the U.S. and coalition allies can provide open military, financial and political support should be identified. To date we have been reluctant to do this. The February 1999 issuance of the Presidential Determination identifying SCIRI, a

Shi'a based entity, as one of the approved opposition organizations eligible to receive assistance under the Iraqi Liberation Act is a promising beginning.

A second step should be the establishment of bases in Kuwait from where the Shi'a opposition forces could train and deploy their forces. We should commence a sustained and organized guerrilla campaign against Iraqi military and government targets inside southern Iraq and Baghdad. The Shi'a opposition forces must be able to quickly establish their legitimacy as an effective opposition element around which other like minded Iraqis might rally. This objective will require determined support, economic and military, and the resolve by U.S. officials and public alike to support a sustained campaign. Success will not be achieved overnight and it should not be attempted with one swift invasion as was contemplated in the Bay of Pigs operation.

The next stage of action, following the successful organization and training of a viable opposition force, should be to move the base of operations from Kuwait into southern Iraq. It is from such a base that Iraqi domestic support, both Sunni and Shi'a, could more easily be recruited and organized. This stage will require significant U.S. military support in both establishing the base of operations in southern Iraq as well as its continued protection from attack by Iraqi military forces. The U.S. will not be able to hide its hand in this endeavor. We should not have to worry about the consequences of international condemnation if we take care in the selection of legitimate Iraqi opposition elements to which the U.S. provides support.

A central problem with Iraqi opposition groups to date has been their lack of legitimacy among the populace inside Iraq. As stated earlier, this was also a central problem with the Bay of Pigs operation. Then as now, we attempted to formulate our opposition support program around elements living in exile outside of the country. In most cases, these elements could only



lay claim to a theoretical measure of legitimacy and had no base of sustainable support inside the country. By working with existing groups already operating inside of Iraq, we might avoid a repeat of previous errors as long as congress and the national command authority can keep their nerve and sustain the effort.

### Conclusion

History is replete with lessons but too often, we fail to learn from those lessons. The purpose of this paper has been to look back upon the lessons of the Bay of Pigs operation to seek a formula for how to approach the current problem in Iraq. There are no simple answers. We can, however, avoid repeating errors of the past by closely examining how those errors occurred. We can also use a study of this nature to inspire us into action when we seem to have reached a point of almost total inaction.

Four principal lessons were gleaned from the Bay of Pigs failure: military command entities should have primary responsibility for conducting the operation; opposition elements to whom the U.S. provides support should be carefully selected and be assured of domestic support; no decision to use force must be implemented without a decision to use whatever force is necessary; and the maintenance of covertness will be limited by the military capabilities to be utilized and should therefore not be a controlling or limiting factor.

If the U.S. political and military leadership adheres to the above lessons in approaching the problem of removing Saddam from power in Iraq we should be able to reinvigorate the Iraqi opposition effort. By doing so, we will resolve a problem that has persisted for too long. This effort will require close coordination between the U.S. military and intelligence organizations, both working in close concert with legitimate Iraqi opposition elements with firm roots of

support inside of Iraq. We need not face another failure at the dawn of the new century similar to what we suffered in Cuba in 1961.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Congress, House, The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, Bill enacted in the House of Representatives, 105<sup>th</sup> Cong, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess, 20 October 1998, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Wyden, Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story (New York: Simon and Schuster 1979), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Paul L. Kesaris, ed., Operation Zapata: The Ultrasensitive Report and Testimony of the Board of Inquiry on the Bay of Pigs (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1981), 48-49.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Kornbluh, ed. Bay of Pigs Declassified (New York: The New Press, 1998), 145-146.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>6</sup> Wyden, 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack and Gideon Rose, "The Rollback Fantasy," Foreign Affairs, January/February 1999, 25.

<sup>9</sup> George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, A World Transformed (New York: Praeger, 1998), 489.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), 168-190.

<sup>11</sup> Congress, The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Superintendent of Documents, Presidential Determination No. 99-13: Designations Under the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998. Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents. 8 February 1999, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Kornbluh, ed., 2.

<sup>14</sup> Wyden, 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>16</sup> Cockburn, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Wyden, 206.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>19</sup> General Anthony Zinni, "Statement Before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Armed Services." 28 January 1999.

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<sup>20</sup> Byman, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>22</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, The Shi'is of Iraq (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 269.

<sup>23</sup> David Wurmser, Tyranny's Ally: America's Failure to Defeat Saddam Hussein (Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1999), 74.

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